Exploring English Grammar: From Formal to Functional

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Introducing English Language: A Resource Book for Students

L. Mullany and P. Stockwell

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Everyone agrees that 'language in use' is a good thing to be concerned with, though there is perhaps less agreement about what exactly this means. While considerations of meaning and use figure prominently in the two books under review, they are addressed from very different perspectives. One book has a relatively narrow focus, presenting a particular grammatical model that aims to unite form and function inside a single conceptual framework. The other offers a more wide-angle view, complementing a brief account of language forms with a survey of a whole range of largely sociolinguistic concerns.

Exploring English Grammar is written for 'upper undergraduate and postgraduate' students. Its purpose is to introduce Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), a model originated in the 1960s by the linguist Michael Halliday. SFG aims to show how grammatical forms and their uses can be linked by a single overarching model that will 'systematically . . . relate grammar to meaning, function and context' (p. 191). It is designed, say the authors, to be useful to professionals who engage with language-related, real-world issues and problems (for example educators, translators, and speech therapists).

Central concepts in SFG are 'system' and 'choice'. As an illustration, the authors consider declarative, interrogative, and imperative clauses. Traditional formal and communicative approaches to grammar, we are told, take a 'syntagmatic' perspective, analysing these clause types in terms of the sequential ordering of the elements (subject, verb, object, etc.) in each. SFG complements this view by stressing a 'paradigmatic' perspective, whereby the three clause types are seen as a set or 'system' of options, from which speakers choose in accordance with their communicative intentions.

The book has a very clear two-part organization. The first part looks in some detail at English grammar as it relates to communicative functions, considering in particular the different grammatical options for 'talking about procedures', 'describing', 'talking about the past', and 'predicting and hypothesizing'. The second part deals with SFG proper. The key idea here is that we can move beyond the familiar communicative functions, in order to analyse language use in terms of three very general 'metafunctions'. These are the ideational function (the use of language to represent the world), the interpersonal function (language use as it encodes the social roles and status of interlocutors), and the textual function (the way language use varies according to the channel of communication, involving, for example different degrees of interactivity and spontaneity). The discussion here links SFG to register analysis and genre analysis, before moving into a more detailed survey of the metafunctions in terms of the SFG concepts of 'field', 'tenor', and 'mode'. The exposition, though sometimes quite technical in the later parts of the book, is generally very clear, and the authors do a good job of showing how different grammatical features (for example noun phrase structure, modality, and pronoun use) can be systematically linked to different aspects of context.

The description of English grammar in the earlier chapters is somewhat mixed in quality. Much of it is very good: there are excellent accounts of noun phrase structure, the use of perfect verb forms, the functions of 'past' tenses, reasons for choice between active and passive, and many other matters. Some areas are less well explained: for example the function of determiners, the grammar of relative clauses, and future reference. The distinction between tense and aspect could be better drawn and the analysis of clause types could be improved, as could the treatment of embedding.

The pedagogic structure of the book is excellent. Throughout, explanations are backed up by relevant examples of language in use and well-designed activities. The examples are among the several things that make the book a pleasure to read: they are brilliantly chosen. The opening discussion of formal and functional grammar is illustrated in turn by an extract from a speech therapy session, a section from an 1861 grammar of English (strikingly good within its limitations), and a piece of writing by a nine-year-old boy. These are followed by a hilarious transcript of a telephone conversation between a woman who has discovered a raccoon in her garage and her less than helpful husband: this alone comes close to justifying the price of the book. Other examples include Thackeray's account of the battle of Waterloo, a passage from a hotel brochure, an extract from

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a contract, and—a marvellous illustration of grammar in action—an email exchange that gradually turns sour. In each case, the activities lead the reader to consider in detail how the grammatical choices contribute to the communicative effect. (There are occasional discrepancies between the information given in the answer keys to the activities and that contained in the main body of the text.) One small editorial niggle: similar but independent sequential numbering is used for the chapter subsections, the illustrative texts, and the activities; so that, for example pages 69–77 contain the following headings in order: '2.4 Adjuncts', 'Activity 2.7', 'Text 2.10', 'Activity 2.8', 'Text 2.11', 'Activity 2.9', 'Activity 2.10', 'Text 2.12', and '2.5 Summary'. This is quite confusing.

Perhaps because of the space given to activities, the book sometimes seems rather slow-moving. And the analysis of grammar in functional terms does not always seem to add very much to what the reader is likely to know already. A transcript of a conversation about a plane flying near the White House (p. 206) is followed by the information that 'Choices in lexis and in subjects, objects, complements and adjuncts show that the main topic is a plane incident in the USA'. One can be forgiven for wondering whether the apparatus of SFG is really needed to establish this. Similarly, it is not very illuminating to learn that interviewers ask more questions than interviewees and that intimates use endearments; or to find out, on reaching page 255, that stories have past tenses, time reference, and third person pronouns. Elsewhere readers are shown a transcript of a dinner table conversation with the four speakers labelled and are asked 'Which features of Text 9.6 tell you it is a conversation?' (p. 372). Sometimes, indeed, the conceptual apparatus of SFG seems to contain a good deal less than meets the eye:

> The SFG model posits that there is a two-way relationship between the social and cultural environment and linguistic choices. That is, the particular field, tenor and mode configuration affects the kinds of meaning we make and the language we choose to express those meanings. But equally, by making certain language choices (rather than others), we make different kinds of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning and thus have some influence over the particular field, tenor, and mode configuration that is created. (pp. 226–7)

In other words, we choose the right language to express our meanings, and (saying the same thing the other way round) our meanings are expressed by the language we choose.

It is beyond the scope of a short review to take issue seriously with SFG or with the somewhat simplified version presented in *Exploring English Grammar*. However, it is worth drawing attention to some areas where the claims of the theory, as represented in this book, appear questionable. It is irritating to be told for the umpteenth time that a current grammatical model, in contrast to the 'traditional formal approach', pays attention 'not just to grammatical forms, but also to the way these forms contribute to meaning' (p. 47 and elsewhere). The discovery that grammatical structures have meanings predates SFG by several thousand years, as does the notion of 'grammar as choice' between members of a paradigmatic set or 'system' of alternatives. (Do the authors really suppose that older grammarians concealed from their readers the fact that plural nouns refer to more than one entity, that tense is related to the expression of time, that personal pronouns refer to different participants in the speech event, or that modal verbs express degrees of certainty and control?)

Another disputable claim is that SFG somehow brings the complexity of English grammar under one simplifying three-part roof:

> Rather than setting out a vast reference inventory of structures and rules, or even a list of communicative functions (as some reference grammars do), it brings together those areas of grammar that have particular significance for meaning-making in the broadest sense (i.e. ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning). For many users, this gives the endless sea of grammatical terms a shape and coherence that make them manageable and meaningful, and, equally important, helps text analysis to be more systematic. (p. 232)

But English grammar, like that of any language, *is* complex, and can only be comprehensively described by giving a good deal of information about regularities and their limitations. Whether this information is classified under formal headings ('the noun phrase', 'the verb phrase', 'clause types', etc.) or in functional terms ('the grammar associated with the ideational function', 'the grammar associated with the interpersonal function', etc.), the facts are the same: the complexities of noun phrase structure, the elaborate constraints on the use of articles, or the niceties of word order do not magically disappear under the functional umbrella.

It is not in any case clear that the model does successfully 'systematically . . . relate grammar to meaning, function and context'. While the authors certainly establish persuasive correlations between

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some grammatical features and aspects of context, they do not show convincingly, in my view, that language structure and function in general are in a systematic one-to-one relationship – indeed far from it. And a good deal of the discussion (including some of the most interesting analyses) drifts out to the edges of grammar to incorporate matters of lexis, stylistics, and rhetoric. There is nothing at all wrong with this in principle, but it dilutes the central claim.

As far as readers of this Journal are concerned, it is worth bearing in mind that foreign language teaching does not depend heavily on specific theoretical models, and that attempts to import particular 'grammars' into the classroom have not been shown to work well. Theoretical grammarians seek relatively abstract generalizations that can be applied to languages and language as a whole. Day-to-day teaching, on the other hand, is directed at people who already have an implicit knowledge of how language works overall, and who are more concerned with language-specific details than with ways in which these details fit into higher level abstractions. This is particularly the case with functional grammar. Non-native students of English know about ideational, interactional, etc. uses of language by virtue of having mother tongues. Their concern is not to learn how to choose between statements, questions, and imperatives or how to distinguish descriptions from narratives or politeness from directness; it is to master the forms that are needed to express these functions appropriately in English. This is not to denigrate the book under review: for those wishing to know more about SFG, *Exploring English Grammar* is an excellent introduction, and it may well offer valuable insights to teachers working at a level where text structure becomes a central issue. But, for all the book's merits, it does not seem to me that SFG has a great deal to contribute to ordinary language teaching. (After all, if it did we would all be using it: it has been around for half a century.)

The students that *Introducing English Language* is aimed at, though this is nowhere stated explicitly, are likely to be postgraduates at British universities working for MAs in English Language, Applied Linguistics, and related subjects. According to the Introduction, the book's 300-odd pages offer such students 'comprehensive coverage of the main aspects of the English language, as well as providing an introduction to key disciplines of linguistics such as historical, social, and psycholinguistics, and also core areas in language study including acquisition, standardization, and the globalization of English' (p. i).

Like other volumes in the Routledge English Language Introductions series, Mullany and Stockwell's book has a cyclical organization. It is divided into four parts: 'Introduction', 'Development', 'Exploration', and 'Extension' (the latter consisting of an excellent selection of readings). In each part, the same 13 topics reappear in the same order, receiving a different and generally more sophisticated treatment each time. This is a very neat device, enabling the reader to proceed either 'vertically' (reading through all the introductory chapters first and then moving on to the next level) or 'horizontally' (reading, for instance, all four chapters on phonology first and then moving to another topic).

The book is very ambitious in its scope. The 13 topics that cycle through it are phonetics and phonology, morphology and lexis, semantics and pragmatics, syntax, discourse, L1 acquisition, psycholinguistics, language change and standardization, sociolinguistics, World Englishes, stylistics, research methodology, and language theories. Looking at this list, one might wonder whether the book can possibly provide the promised 'comprehensive coverage of the main aspects of the English language', let alone all the other things. And one would be right to do so. There is of course no way in which the authors, in the space available (less than 15 pages per topic, not counting readings), can offer anything more than a quick bird's-eye view of the vast range of subject matter that they set out to deal with.

Despite the space constraints, the authors contrive to provide interesting treatments of many of their topics: they have some very good material on, among other things, aspects of discourse analysis, language and thought, language and the brain, standardization, linguistic identity, and linguistic theories. There is some strikingly good illustrative material. Aspects of conversation analysis, for example, are exemplified by the study of a famous exchange between Tony Blair and George Bush at a moment when they thought the microphone was switched off. The language acquisition strand contains a particularly good study of children learning to read and write, with delightful illustrations of young children's writing at different ages. Sometimes the illustrations are less useful than they might be: a page from a graphic novel scarcely illuminates the discussion of dialect that it is meant to support, and four repetitive pages of Swift's fulminations about the decline of English leave little room for a wider ranging treatment of what the authors call 'Corrections' (presumably 'Correctness').

The space available for 'introducing English language' (the stated purpose of the book) is diluted

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by the fact that not all the topics in fact deal specifically with English. Unfortunately, the authors' preference for discussing the things that we do with language leads them sometimes to lose sight of language itself, focusing on psychological and sociological questions without paying adequate attention to their linguistic correlates. This is largely the case with the semantics and pragmatics strand, which begins, perhaps unwisely, with an attempt to explain the 'sense-reference' distinction made by philosophers of language, before moving on to speech act theory, the Gricean maxims, politeness principles, and similar matters. While parts of this may be valuable for students of linguistics in general, the authors do not always do very much to show how the concepts and distinctions discussed are realized in English. Four pages on the structure of apologies have little to say about the implications of the analysis for language use. Schema theory is arguably only tangentially linked to English, and perhaps to linguistics in general. The syntax strand drifts off into a complex analysis of clause types according to the 'functional processes' that they express: this involves a lot of heavyweight semantic labelling, but does not add very much to the reader's real understanding of how English syntax works. There is a similar problem with the authors' detailed survey of 'lexical semantic relationships' (presented twice in different places in much the same terms), which has the reader negotiating some very hostile terminology (synonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, plesionymy, philonymy, xenonymy, and several other -onymies) to little obvious purpose.

Tasks take up a lot of space. Engaging though many of these are, some are large-scale coursework assignments rather than anything that can be attempted on the basis of the fragmentary information that has been provided in the book. For instance, a six-page reading from Jenny Cheshire in the syntax strand is followed by the instruction 'Consider the difficulties that prefab expressions pose for second-language learners of English. Drawing on your knowledge of such idioms, think about how you would set about designing a teaching course for such students' (p. 219). A few pages of introduction to syntax and a short reading, however informative, do not go very far towards equipping students to tackle second language course design.

Some tasks have a brainstorm character, as if they had been dreamt up for the book rather than emerging from a successful teaching programme; on occasion, they are so far removed from realistic pedagogy as to be downright impossible. The phonology strand has some striking examples. After a very brief and somewhat muddled introduction to phonetics and phonology in the first two parts, the students find themselves, in the 'Exploration' section, coming to grips with the oddly labelled topic of 'Performing accent in poetry'. This requires them to read aloud two poems, one written in Black Country dialect, the other (Burns' *Address to a Haggis*) in Scots, before translating the poems into standard English and explaining 'what is gained or lost in this rewriting process'. (The relevance of this latter task to phonology is not entirely clear.) Even if the Burns poem did not contain six misprints, two of which reduce parts of the first two stanzas to gibberish, the Scots–English translation would be completely beyond the average English native speaker, MA student or not. (I can't get very far with it.) Students then look further at the Burns poem and 'attempt to characterise the rhyme' using the phonetic features they were introduced to in the first section. How they decide what the Scots vowels are and 'characterise' them on the basis of a standard English phonemic inventory is not explained. The authors move on to provide their readers, many of whom are likely to be non-native speakers, with McGonagall's well-known *Tay Bridge Disaster* poem, which students are instructed to 'read aloud in a Scottish accent' (I am not making this up), before accounting for its 'overall effectiveness as a piece of poetry'.

The application of language analysis to literary study is clearly a particular interest of the authors. Their approach to stylistics does not, however, always inspire confidence. They comment favourably on Browning's choice of modal verbs in a passage that has no modal verbs (p. 46). They tell us that a stanza by Byron has 'a lot of sibilants' (/s/, /z/, etc.); the stanza has a lower sibilant count (about three every ten syllables) than the authors' own introduction. And they assert that the /t/ and /d/ sounds in the same stanza (which they mistakenly call 'dentals') support Byron's focus on 'the outward senses of visual description and touch' without offering any empirical justification at all for this alleged 'sensual phonetic iconicity' (p. 104).

The authors' somewhat cavalier attitude to linguistic detail shows up strikingly in the chapters that deal with core language topics. (This may be the only book in history to offer an introduction to English syntax that does not mention tense, aspect, or articles.) Much of the terminology introduced is left undefined, and it is not always used consistently. Explanations of key concepts are often either unclear or misleading. The novice reader is unlikely to finish the introductory chapters with any real understanding of what is meant by 'phoneme' or of the differences between, for

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example, phonology and phonetics, complements and adjuncts, cohesion and coherence, or semantics and pragmatics.

Worse than this, a great deal of the information given about English is simply wrong. 'He' is called a noun on page 17 (and pronouns are generally airbrushed out of the account of English grammar: the list of parts of speech on page 18 makes no mention of them, and the definition of noun phrase on page 16 excludes pronouns). Readers trying to make sense of the tree diagram on page 18 will not be helped by being told that 'with no difficulty into boxes and cartons and little papercups' is a verb phrase, or that 'no' in 'no difficulty' is an adjective. 'Be' is called a transitive verb on page 75. 'She told me that he was fat' is said to contain a relative clause, while 'The man who was fat' contains a subordinate clause (p. 77). The authors think that 'up' in 'ran a bill up' is a preposition (p. 93). 'Co-text' is not a two-word combination, and 'nonsense' is not a combination of 'none' + 'sense' (p. 6). 'Pasta' is not an import that we owe to the scientific enlightenment (p. 8). The verb 'talk' is not derived from the noun; it's the other way round (p. 7). A chart that seems to be intended to illustrate the tongue positions of the English vowel phonemes, on page 62, is actually a second showing of the International Phonetic Alphabet cardinal vowel chart with four 'central vowels' added: something quite different and seriously misleading in the context. Different symbols are used in different places to transcribe the same vowel; the same transcription is used at least once for different vowels. The term 'allophone' is used indiscriminately to refer to individual variation in pronunciation, to regional variation, and to variation conditioned by the phonetic context (its correct meaning). We are told that the front of the tongue touches the hard palate in /j/ as in 'you'. (Well, to be fair, it does if you have a strong Spanish accent.) And so on and so on.

It is hard to understand what is going on here. A student writing an assignment containing basic errors on this scale would unquestionably fail. But the authors are two senior academics from the English department of a prestigious university, who have been commissioned to write an introduction to the English language for a major linguistics publisher. Can it really be the case that they (and Routledge's content editor) don't know the difference between a determiner and an adjective, that they confuse adverb particles with prepositions, that they aren't sure what modal verbs are, or that they don't actually know very much about basic phonetics? Surely not. I can only suppose that they sort of know these things, but are in a hurry to get on to what interests them—language in use—and are not very concerned to get the boring things right. Well, this really won't do. The book is intended for graduate students, and one of the things that graduate students have to learn is a respect for facts, however dull: in both academic and pedagogic writing, one does have to take the time to get things right. As Wyatt Earp said in a different context: 'Fast is fine, but accuracy is everything'.

Introducing English Language has a lot of good things in it, but it cannot possibly be recommended as an introduction to the English language.

The reviewer

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